

MAPPING A FUTURE FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

by Kevin Payan

The phone rings. The woman at the other end needs a quick answer to a simple query. Adminis-trivia. Easy enough, you think, although you don't know the answer off-hand. You promise her a prompt reply. Before you know it, you're clicking through infinite screens and crawling through heaps of publications. Lost, you wish you had a map. The hours pass, and you finally discover that the information is nowhere to be found, not up-to-date, conflicting, or altogether incomprehensible.

Documentation in DND

This scenario is all too common in DND, and the troubles cited are but a few of those noted in the 1984 DND Directives Promulgation Report. No wonder, when one considers the Department's countless volumes of administrative and technical documentation — over 100,000 in total, according to recent counts.

How can people be expected to find the information they need, when they need it? Today, people rely on accessible and accurate information to do their jobs. Communicating effectively is not just beneficial. It's essential.

Armies and The Printed Wor(l)d

Since the days of Sun Tzu, military strategists have professed that the central problem of command lies in the shaping a clearly defined organization to oversee a body of disciplined, well-ordered troops.

The easiest way to achieve this is by organizing the troops around, and arming them with, a body of well-ordered information and documentation. What better way is there to get people doing the right thing than to provide them with the right information, in the right quantity and at the right time?

The Challenge

With this question in mind, the Red Tape Action Team (RTAT) was created in 1994 to rid DND of excessive bureaucracy. Simply put, they set out to make people's workaday world less taxing and more productive.

After much study and analysis of various options, RTAT's efforts culminated when, at a 1996 meeting of the Defence Management Committee, management gave the go-ahead to develop a collection of Defence Administrative Orders and Directives (DAODs) to streamline administrative policy and instruction.

While RTAT has since evolved into DMPD, the goal of the DAOD development process remains the same: "to eliminate unnecessary policies, simplify the rest and make them current, accurate and understandable."

Getting Started

But there is more to DMPD's goal than simply eliminating and simplifying existing corporate direction. There is also the issue of drawing on a more user-friendly format that can be accessed both on paper and electronically.

In presentations to DMPD's clients, Erik Adler, manager of policy development for DMPD, is unwavering in his vision for a collection of orders and directives, in which readers will be able to find the information they seek — without a clutter of manuals on their desks. And it will take just a few seconds — a simple click of the mouse.

The issue for DMPD, therefore, became one of not only leveraging information with technology, but leveraging the message with methodology as well.

The Chosen Path

DMPD looked to the Information Mapping® research-based method as an enabler in this process. First developed in academic circles in the late 1960s, Information Mapping has evolved into a leading edge method for analyzing, organizing, writing, sequencing and formatting information to improve communication.

It is used worldwide by hundreds of thousands of people in over forty countries, throughout organizations of all sizes in the private and public sectors.

"Some worlds are made of atoms, but yours is made of tiny marks marching in neat lines, like armies of insects, across pages and pages of white paper."

- Alasdair Gray

Information Mapping's method is essentially a synthesis of conceptual tools and techniques. For example, the information block replaces the paragraph as the traditional unit of thought, which allows for text to be broken down into manageable units according to their purpose for the reader. Each unit of information then stands as a self-contained and subject-specific slice of a bigger pie.

Its Value...

Information Mapping's value is largely derived from the research that went into its development. Instead of focusing on the subtlety of language, the method is based on substantial research into people's cognitive processes and how information can best be presented for retention and retrieval of critical information.

And what could be more important in an organization such as DND, where having timely and relevant information can impact on the success or failure of an operation, or mean the difference between life and death?

But the true value of Information Mapping is its versatility. Its principles and format can be easily applied to any communications product, from a simple e-mail or memorandum, through to more complex proposals, reports, and administrative and technical manuals – both on paper and electronically. "Information Mapping lends itself not only to the page, but to the screen as well," says Adler, "That was the real appeal."

...for Writers...

Information Mapping's value for writers is substantial. The method allows for a common approach to the writing process, enabling writers to build clear, concise documents.

Any of the writers in DMPD (all of whom have taken at least one Information Mapping seminar) will tell you they can draft a document with greater speed and accuracy now than a year or two ago.

"Amendments and updates are also easier to make than ever before," says Adler, "since this modular approach lets us create reusable components that can be easily integrated into, or shared with, other documents." And the ease of

Benefits for Readers and Writers

Readers and writers, take note. The following table identifies some of the benefits offered to you by Information Mapping's method.

For Readers, the method...

reduces:

- reading time by 10% to 50%
- errors in job performance by up to 54%

and increases:

- comprehension by up to 70%
- learning capacity by 10% to 50%.

For Writers, the method...

reduces:

- writing time by up to 50%
- training time by 30% to 50%

and increases:

- clarity of documents by up to 66%
- accuracy of retrieval by up to 32%.

transferring documents between print and electronic platforms not only saves his writers and approval authorities time, but it saves the Department money as well.

...and for Readers

"While Information Mapping is a great tool for writers," says Adler, "the real benefactor is the reader."

And user feedback to date on mapped DAODs confirms this view. "Electronic access saves space on my bookshelf. And it's a quick and easy way of looking things up when I need to," says Captain Andrew Wedgwood, an aerospace engineer in Ottawa.

"The documents are concise and easy to use," says Sergeant Lee Snow, "As a senior clerk, I need to have this information at my fingertips."

Clearly defined blocks and labels ensure a consistent look and feel to documents and allow readers to scan them quickly and access what is relevant to them. Independent research also suggests the modular design helps to reduce reading time by as much as 50 percent.

Further studies suggest that these savings, in turn, provide for increased capacity to learn and retain new information, which translates into fewer blunders in job performance. Imagine the potential long-term savings in time and money across any organization, big or small.

The Way Ahead

As awareness of Information Mapping's many advantages in both paper and online environments continues to grow, the number of people using the method

in DND is growing too. Information Mapping's method has already spread to organizations outside DMPD, and the trend is likely to continue as managers recognize the benefits of high-performance documentation and seek out training for themselves and their staff. Information Mapping's method is already being used for various high-level reports and project profiles, generated both internally and externally, as service providers and suppliers are also clueing into the method's many advantages.

Meanwhile, for DMPD the process of renewing and rewriting existing corporate administrative direction continues. "We'll continue to map out a future for ourselves," says Adler, "until we have a completed collection of DAODs that are clear, easy to read and understandable." If the documents they have published to date are an indication of things to come, the way ahead for well-organized documentation in DND is clearer now than ever. ✪

Kevin Payan runs Absolutely (W)rite!, a writing, editing and communications consulting business based in Ottawa.

*In Canada, Toronto-based **Communicare** provides training and consulting in Information Mapping's method. Information Mapping is one of several products and services that Communicare offers to its wide-ranging clientele across Canada in an effort to provide "Human Solutions for the Information Age™." Visit the Communicare web site @ www.communicare.com or call (416) 769-0846 for more information.*